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Vincent

Going SOLO

Cabernet Franc is shedding its blending-grape reputation and revving with single-varietal possibility in California.

Tracey and John Skupny were not the first to make Cabernet Franc in Napa Valley. That honor has been lost to the annals of history. But when the couple launched their winery Lang & Reed in 1993, the operation became one of the first to make the grape its flagship.

The Skupnys couldn't have known it then, but their decision to put Cab Franc front and center was a prelude to the grape's ascension in the region.

It's an unlikely plot twist in the story of Napa Valley, in which Cab Franc has mostly played an obscure, supporting role. First, Zinfandel led the region as the most planted grape. By 1997, that had changed, and Cabernet Sauvignon became king. Cabernet Franc was largely written off as a blending grape, albeit one that served a useful purpose.

"In Cabernet Sauvignon, Cab Franc is used to amplify aromatics, to give it lift," says John Skupny. In its ripest expressions, juicy plums, berries and bramble rise from the glass. When conditions are cooler or yields are high, the savoriness of Hatch chiles or the green spice of jalapeño emerges. In between, the grape delivers a pleasing constellation of notes, including flowering herbs, dried grasses and tobacco.

Cab Franc can also transform a wine's texture. "It brings more elegance to a rough finish, smooths the wine out and, in warmer areas or vintages, it makes Cabernet Sauvignon smell more Cab-like," says Skupny. But as much as Cab Franc can be used to elevate a blend, many vintners have made the varietal disappear into it, using it as a background character with no speaking lines.

Three decades later, much has changed. Interest in the variety has skyrocketed, and so has its price tag. How did we—and Cab Franc—get here?

BY
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B The Early Days

ack in 1996, there were more than 10,335 acres of Cabernet Sauvignon in Napa Valley. Only 756 acres were dedicated to Cab Franc vines, most of them planted in inferior ground.

There had been a few valuable exceptions. Cult classic winery Dalla Valle had launched its Maya cuvée in the 1980s, relying on around 40% Cab Franc and filling out the rest with Cabernet Sauvignon. The vintners planted Cab Franc in a prime location, giving it at least as much attention as its more famous counterpart.

Another bright spot for the variety could be found in the coveted soils of the Mayacamas bench in Oakville, where the Detert Family Vineyards' east block was one of the first important sites for the variety, planted in 1949. Robert Mondavi Reserve Cabernet from 1966 through the 1970s, and Opus One, beginning in 1979, included Detert Cab Franc.

Though blends, these wines kept the door open for the varietal's eventual prestige play. But it also meant that the best Franc fruit was largely spoken for.

A Sea Change

John Skupny, while affable, is also tenacious. In the early 1990s, he worked to get Franc planted in better sites. "It needs the right place," he says. "Otherwise, it's growing for production more than place or terroir."

Proving that place matters deeply for the variety, Lang & Reed launched with two well-regarded Cabernet Francs: a fresh, friendly style and another that was aged for several years in barrel.

The venture, while novel, paid off. Today, Lang & Reed is a hallmark Napa Valley winery, known for cutting paths just outside the mainstream. Present-day interest in Cab Franc owes much thanks to the Skupnys. But even as the varietal gained popularity, acreage devoted to it did not. By 2023, Cabernet Sauvignon had expanded to more than 25,000 acres—a whopping 54% of Napa Valley's vineyards. Cab Franc claimed a mere 1,224 acres, accounting for only 3% of the region's plantings.

The cost of Cabernet Franc has exceeded that of Napa Valley's king grape for the past eight years. In 2023, Cabernet Sauvignon sold at an average price of \$9,235 per ton,

while Cab Franc was \$10,633, according to the Napa County Agricultural Crop Report. That's an 800% increase from its 1996 price of \$1,647 per ton.

It's a classic conundrum: As a grape becomes more fashionable, demand goes up and so does its price.

"Once grape prices exceed a certain amount per ton, you cannot make a \$35 bottle of wine," says Skupny. "When Napa Valley prices for Cabernet Franc exceeded that amount, I started looking to vineyards in other parts of the North Coast."

Lang & Reed currently makes four cuvées of Cab Franc. The most expensive, an aged wine from Napa Valley, sells for \$250, a fact Skupny can barely believe. But he also has a broader regional cuvée, the California Cabernet Franc, which sells for \$30-\$35.

The wines carry pure aromas of blackberry bramble, the branch and leaf as much as the fruit. The lightest wines are both juicy and mouthwatering. The ones with age verge into flavors of tobacco spice and dusty earth. From these bottlings, it's clear why Cab Franc is catching on.

"Once grape prices exceed a certain amount per ton, you can not make a \$35 bottle of wine."

—John Skupny

“Any time I think of Cabernet Franc, I think of floral perfume. That is what I love about it. It can make a beautiful wine.”

—Cathy Corison

Napa's Cabernet Franc-ophiles

Its reputation keeps growing. While vintners still mainly use it for blending, more and more also bottle it on its own. Producers like Robert Sinskey, Chappellet, Inglenook, Snowden, Favia, Arietta and Titus are among them. The plethora of single-varietal Cabernet Francs currently available offers an exploration into terroir, yes, but terroir with style. The best bottlings are revelations of the variety's versatility and adaptability.

Cathy Corison's eponymous label remains devoted to Cabernet Sauvignon alone. But in the early 2000s, when she began working with Sunbasket Vineyard in St. Helena, it included six rows of Franc. Sunbasket is one of her favorite sites in the region, and she admires the maturity of the vines. For 20 years, she's made the Franc under the label Helios.

“It has been a special project for us,” says Corison. “Any time I think of Cabernet Franc, I think of floral perfume. That is what I love about it. It can make a beautiful wine.” Helios offers that floral perfume, juicy blackberries and a slightly sweet, almost earthy aroma—like the dry warmth of late-summer hay.

In 2000, the Detert family launched its own winery with Cab Franc. It was the first time Detert Cab Franc had been freed from blending. The effort revealed dark fruits with savory, leafy notes like dusty tobacco, cherry leaf and fennel. It was elegant while savory, detailed and attractive.

Fourteen years later, Kashy Khaledi founded Ashes & Diamonds to celebrate Cabernet Franc. “It's his favorite variety,” says winemaker Steve Matthiasson, who works with Khaledi. They rely on vineyards from the southern parts of Napa Valley, where, in the cooler environment, aromas develop savory notes alongside resinous, flowering herbs. The tannins are supple and elegant.

Key vineyards for Ashes & Diamonds were previously farmed by Michael Havens. A legend of the region in the 1980s and '90s,

Havens focused on Merlot, but also small lots of Cabernet Franc.

“Havens made some of the great Cab Francs back in the day,” says Matthiasson. “He always talked about how it shows terroir. Those were some of my favorite red wines. That's part of why we get Cab Franc for Ashes & Diamonds where we do, because it is one of Michael Havens's old vineyards.”

But back in Havens's day, Cab Franc was still too niche a variety to sell. That's why in the 1990s, he chose to make a blend of Cab Franc and Merlot known as Bourriquot. Hearts and minds are more open to Cab Franc today.

The shift in attitudes has fueled Matthiasson to make Franc in his own style. Pushing even further into the attributes of cooler Napa vineyards than Ashes & Diamonds, the Matthiasson Franc is profoundly light with almost lacy tannins, and aromatics that smell of green chili, dried sage and pencil shavings. It's no doubt polarizing, but undeniably refreshing and perfect alongside food.

Other winemakers, like Taylor Berkley Boydston, have been busy exploring new expressions of the variety. In 2016, he launched T. Berkley Wines, which produces a range of Cab Francs that span different regions and vineyards. Among them are a Franc rosé, and a curious white wine called Franc Blanc produced in the style of a still Blanc de Noirs. The rosé gives both the juicy bramble fruit and earthy tones of Cab Franc but in lighter form, while the Franc Blanc picks up floral aromatics with honeydew and dried grasses. It's clearly a project born of a love for Cab Franc as much as for California.

Stepping back, it's evident that Cabernet Franc has too long-standing a history in Napa Valley to be considered an ingénue. But altogether, these producers are delivering fresh, new takes in the Golden State's most famous region. And these certainly won't be the last. And this certainly won't be the last word on the subject.